

SHADOWS

March 22, 1987, 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture

Genesis 1:1-8

John 9:1-41

"I am the light of the world: he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

---John 8:12 (RSV)

One of the things that distinguishes great writing is that it deals with the great human issues. Ernest Hemingway, for instance, couldn't be entirely comfortable with traditional religion but neither could he let it alone. One of the short stories he wrote, one of his favorites, actually, is entitled, A Clean Well-Lighted Place. Let me sketch it out very briefly, and allow it to be a commentary - a literary illustration of that story you just heard, from the Ninth chapter of the Gospel according to John.

In A Clean Well-Lighted Place, two waiters are closing the cafe for the night. The last customer, an old man, won't leave. He's a regular customer, he drinks in the cafe every night. He has money. He used to have a wife. He recently tried to commit suicide but his niece saved him... The younger of the two waiters is becoming impatient. He wants to go home to his wife. The older waiter says, "I am of those who like to stay late at the cafe. With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night."

"I want to go home and into bed," the younger waiter persists. The older man continues, "We are of two different kinds. Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be someone who needs the cafe."

Finally the younger waiter persuades the elderly customer to leave. The older waiter closes the cafe almost reluctantly, and over a nightcap on the way home, muses to himself - "(The Cafe) is well-lighted. The light is very good. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name; thy kingdom nada, thy will be nada, in nada as it is in nada... Hail nothing, full of nothing, nothing is with thee." [The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway, Scribner, p. 379].

Darkness and shadows often represent everything that threatens life. Darkness in literature often represents emptiness, meaninglessness,

nothingness. It is a primal dichotomy. Our first revelation, our first sensation, or very close to it, is light. Our oldest story uses the same progression. Before creation can even begin there must be some light on the subject...

"In the beginning darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters. And God said, 'Let there be light:' and there was light."

The primal word, the first thing God says is... "Let's have some light on the subject." It is the moment when time begins. I love Lewis Thomas' image of the moment of creation (I've shared it before - several times - but it keeps suggesting itself to me). Thomas, the scientist, writes about the moment of beginning. "It could not, of course, have been a big bang; with no atmosphere to conduct the sound and no ears. It was something else, occurring in the most absolute silence we can imagine. It was the Great Light." [Late Night Thoughts While listening to Mahler's Ninth Symphony, p. 15].

In poetry, art and literature, the imagery light and darkness have been helpful ways of thinking about truth and falsehood, good and evil. Religious language is full of it... Hopelessness is "the people who live in a land of deep darkness." Despair is "yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death." And in popular culture, unadulterated evil - is Darth Vader, the very prince of darkness.

Over against that ancient theme, there is a kind of cheerful, optimistic, positivism which is appealing because it denies that there is any darkness. Of course, there is plenty of gloomy religion that doesn't seem to know anything about joy and laughter and cheer. But, in reaction to that, there is this almost painfully cheerful religiosity which very simply denies the darkness and suggests that if you keep smiling and wearing "God Loves You" buttons, everything will be all right. Lent is the annual reminder. It is the season when the Christian church pauses in its busyness and its celebrating to ponder the fact that it's dark out there, that the one unarguable proposition is the existence of evil: that human beings have an inherent capacity for tragedy, missing the mark, getting lost, which our forbears used to call sin. Lent is the time when we remember that death is a reality and that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is intended to confront it, not to deny it - or disguise it, or keep us occupied with cheerful things, and not to smother it in the sticky sweetness of popular piety, but to confront it, combat it, go one-on-one with it, in the incredible assertion that God's own son participated in it, stood in the darkness, died - was crucified, dead and buried and descended into hell." Lent insists that we stop and acknowledge the darkness. The colors are somber, the music turns almost mournful. Joy will come with resurrection. But the wisdom of the church is that left to our own devices we choose to pretend that the darkness doesn't exist; and like Hemingway's old waiter, we'd go on drinking brandy rather than confront the night.

So first of all, let us allow for the darkness. Let us hear the literature of the race as it ponders the darkness, from Shakespeare's:

"Out, out brief candle
Life's but a walking shadow" -

to Ernest Hemingway's soliloquy on darkness -

"Our father who art in nada."

to the ancient Psalmist -

"even though I walk through the
valley of the shadow of death,
thou art with me."

And with all of that going for us, let's now turn our attention back to that other short story, a short drama based on an incident in the life of Jesus, carefully written to present for our consideration, the radical suggestion that Jesus Christ - is the light of the world - of all of human history - and of the shadows and darkness of your history and mine.

This story begins with his disciples calling his attention to a blind man. Jesus makes a paste out of his saliva and clay, places it on the man's eyes and tells him to wash in a pool. The man returns - seeing for the first time in his life.

Scene 2: The man's neighbors, who have been watching him stumble out every morning to his spot beside the street to beg, since he was a child, were so surprised that many had trouble believing it was the same man. "What happened?" they ask. "Who opened your eyes?" He answers, "A man called Jesus."

Scene 3: The neighbors bring the Pharisees and we learn that it is the Sabbath and that among the many things you cannot do on the Sabbath is mix up a batch of paste and smear it on someone's eyes. Some of them leap on the fact that Sabbath rules have been broken. Others are more impressed that a man blind from birth is walking around seeing. "What's your opinion?" they ask. The man says, "He is a prophet."

Scene 4: It occurs to someone that maybe the whole thing is a hoax so they bring in the man's parents. "Yes, he is our son and yes, he's been blind since the day he was born."

Scene 5: Back to the man, walking around enjoying his sight for the first time. Now the Pharisees take the offensive. "This man who healed you is a sinner, you know, because he violated the Sabbath."

The Pharisees let him know, in no uncertain terms, that they are disciples of Moses, the true man of God. By now, however, the blind man has warmed to his subject. He nearly ridicules the Pharisees for not seeing what is going on. They respond by casting him out of the Synagogue - they excommunicate him, cut him off from the nation's culture, support system. The man can see, but he's in a new, and in many ways, more threatening darkness.

Finale: Jesus hears what has happened to him and comes back to find him. The man, who has come all the way from blindness to sight, from darkness through shadows into the full light, now says, "Lord, I believe." And as the curtain begins to fall, several lingering Pharisees, watching almost wistfully, say, "Do you suppose we're the blind ones?" And one thinks of Hemingway's waiter not wanting to go home at night...because all is nothing.

That's a striking story. The man who begins in the darkness ends up in the light. The ones who begin somewhere at least near the light end up in darkness. There is a disturbing hint here that healing, seeing for the first time may not be an entirely comfortable experience; that the predictability of the status quo is appealing; that blindness, while not exciting, can be used to provide for oneself begging by the roadside. In addition, the religious traditionalists in this story are so threatened by the newness Jesus represents that they hold on even more tightly to their old certainties, almost consciously shutting their eyes so no light can penetrate.

One time the late Paul Tillich observed that "The church very early, forgot the Word of the Gospel that he is the truth; and claimed that (its) doctrines about him were the truth." [The New Being, p. 70] The trouble with the Pharisees in this story is the trouble with religious zealots of any variety (zealot is a man or woman who knows how God would act if God had access to the same information he or she does) and that is that they had forgotten the difference between God and the ideas they believed about God. Their way of understanding had become sacred, their particular illumination of the truth had become a system which accrued to itself the truth and innerancy and infallibility and ultimacy which belongs solely to God. It is the oldest dynamic in the story of humanity and its religion. "Our way is the only way" seems to be the inevitable conclusion of religion. "The light shines only here." Christians are certain Moslems are in the dark. Moslems are certain Christians are in the dark. Christians worry about the Jews being in the dark. Catholics excommunicate Protestants, Protestants imagine a hell full of Catholics. An evangelical spokesperson announced recently with remarkable certainty that people who are opposed to the idea of a Constitutional amendment to put prayer back in the public schools are damned eternally. Baptists are sure Presbyterians are in the shadows, if not the dark, and we ordinarily return the sentiment. Pentecostals feel the same about Episcopalians and if you're the wrong brand of Lutheran, you aren't welcome at the Lord's Table in another brand.

Jesus said "I am the light of the world." You and I are called - not to possess that light - but to be illuminated by it: not to restrain it and limit it, and parcel it out to those who get into the same room with us, but to let it shine to show us what's out there and what's in here: not to hedge it in but to rejoice that in the darkness, there is light.

"Jesus Christ is the light of the world." That's a staggering proposition. It suggests that he is the light by which we see all the rest of reality. If we believed that it would be the end of all theological exclusion and ecclesiastical imperialism. If we believed he was the source

of light - we could stop playing the ecclesiastical numbers game and concentrate instead on keeping the source of light unshuttered. It would mean a new toleration. Jesus Christ is the illumination which allows me to see accurately the contours of the road ahead, the shadows of the world out there and the hidden recesses of my own life. Without Jesus Christ, we confess, we would not see accurately...without the light - which he is - we might conclude that other people are competitors, threats, not brothers and sisters: without Jesus Christ we might actually believe that it is more blessed to get - than to give: that the powerful really do inherit the earth. Without Jesus Christ we might actually believe that there is no hope ultimately and so the best any of us can do is grab all the gusto - while there is still time. I was moved to learn that in the early church this story was always read to candidates for baptism; - people who were going to face alienation and persecution and a new kind of darkness because of their faith. I was moved to learn that in the catacomb art in Rome - the product of the fiercest and cruelest persecution - pictures of this incident occur seven different places.

2,000 years have elapsed...and the human race still lives in shadows. At the outset of the First World War, a British commentator said "The lamps are going out all over Europe and we will not see them lit again in our life time." And so we have witnessed the darkness of wars and famine, of historic evil on a scale never before imagined, of generations now living with the threat of an ultimate and final darkness.

And personally, we know - even though we would rather not deal with it, perhaps cannot say it out loud - the threat of darkness.

We do, on occasion learn that our own decisions can cause us to be cut off, cast out - and very lonely.

We do, on occasion, encounter the truth that life is brief and fragile: when teenagers end theirs prematurely, or when dear friends die in the middle of living, or when colleagues contract deadly diseases.

We do, on occasion, encounter our own mortality, the truth that for each of us there is a valley of the shadow of death through which we must walk.

I was moved to rediscover the almost incidental detail that when the darkness started to descend again on this good, brave man - Jesus came looking for him and found him.

That's the promise here. Not that there is no darkness, but that there is light in it - not that your life in Christ will be placid, pleasant and always cheerful, but that when your integrity forces you to make tough decisions and you live with the inevitable loneliness which results - there is one who comes looking for you.

This promise is not superficially cheerful. It is not trivial. It is that in every darkness - there is light - in the darkness of separation and loneliness - the darkness of guilt - the darkness of sickness - the darkness of depression - the darkness of death itself.

In every darkness there is one whose love for you shines like pure, bright, light.

There is a promise here...that light shines in every darkness...that Jesus Christ - God's love incarnate, is that light.

There is also an invitation---which comes to each of us... It is to discover this light by trusting it: it is to allow this light to illumine all of life: it is, very simply...to do what that formerly blind man did, namely, fall down on one's knees and confess - "Lord, I believe."

Perhaps one of the greatest poets - certainly of our time - was T. S. Eliot; brilliant, complex, sometimes obscure - but one of the extraordinary minds of the twentieth century. He became a Christian in the 1920's and his experience of the faith is expressed in a lovely poem, a very clear poem - a prayer actually...

"O Light invisible, we praise thee!
Too bright for mortal vision
O Creator light, We praise thee far the less;
The eastern light our spires touch at morning...
We thank thee for the lights we have kindled,
The light of altar and sanctuary;
Small lights of those who meditate at midnight
And lights directed through the coloured panes of windows...
We see the light but see not whence it comes.
O Light invisible, we glorify Thee!"

(T. S. Eliot)

Praise be to you, O light invisible.
Praise be to you, O God for light in the darkness.
Praise and Glory to you, Lord God -
for Jesus Christ your son, our Savior,
who is for us, the light of life. Amen.